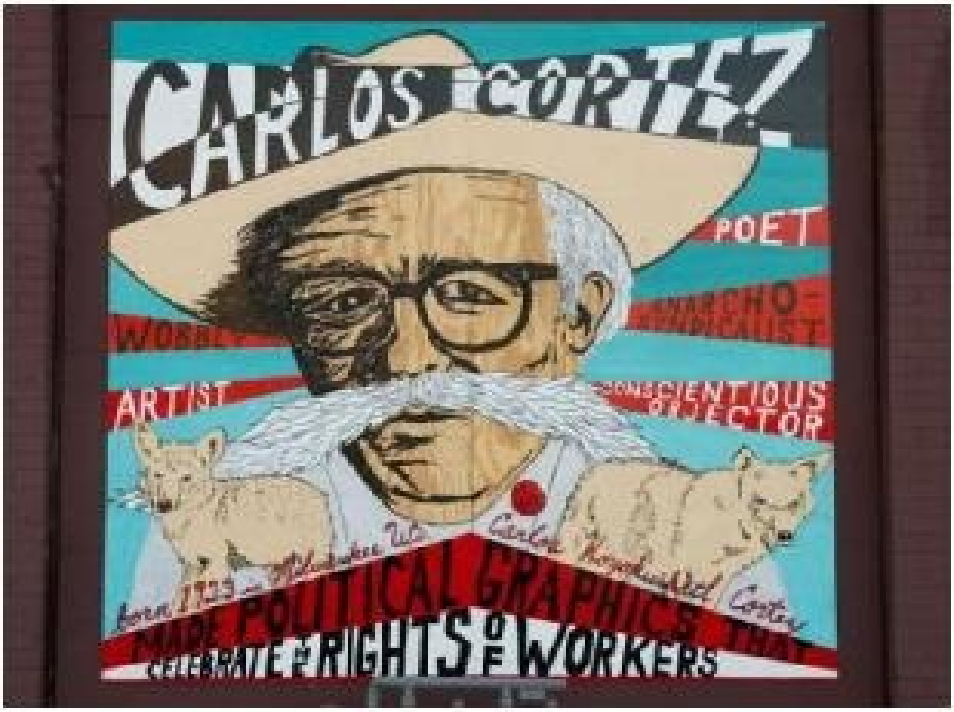
Carlos Cortez (1923 - 2005)



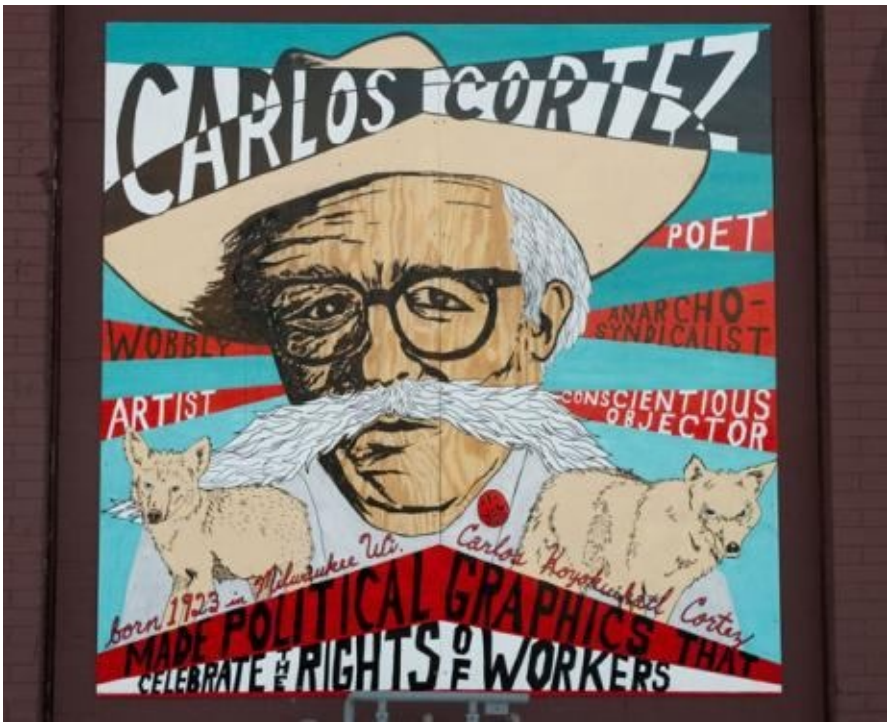
An obitatury for long-time IWW member and artist Carlos Cortez.

"When you do a painting that's it, it's one of a kind. But when you do a graphic the amount of prints you can make from it is infinite. I made a provision in my estate, for whoever will take care of my blocks, that if any of my graphic works are selling for high prices immediate copies should be made to keep the price down.
--Carlos Cortez

Carlos Cortez was an extraordinary artist, poet, printmaker, photographer, songwriter and lifelong political activist. His mother was a German socialist pacifist, and his father was a Mexican Indian organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), also known as the Wobblies. Carlos was a Wobblie until he died. He spent two years in prison for refusing to "shoot at fellow draftees" during World War II.

After his release, Carlos took a series of jobs: in construction, in a small imported foods shop, in a chemical factory. He also started drawing cartoons in 1948 for the Industrial Worker, the IWW newspaper, but soon learned to do linoleum block prints. "Many radical papers—not having advertising, grants or angels who are rich radicals—operate on the brink of bankruptcy. So Industrial Worker couldn't afford to make electric plates out of line drawings. I saw that one of the old-timers was doing linoleum blocks and sending them in because the paper was being printed on a flatbed press. I started doing the same thing, and each issue would have one of my linocuts."

When the price of linoleum became too steep, Carlos started using wood. Used furniture was easy enough to find in any alley. "There's a work of art waiting to be liberated inside every chunk of wood. I'm paying homage to the tree that was chopped down by making this piece of wood communicate something." Carlos later became an accomplished oil and acrylic painter, though he always preferred the woodcuts because they were reproducible and affordable.



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When the Industrial Worker switched to offset in the 1960s, Carlos began drawing pen-and-ink cartoons. He has also served as editor of the newspaper and on the union’s General Executive Board, and was one of the IWW’s most popular public speakers. In 1985, to commemorate the union’s 80th anniversary, he organized an important exhibition, “Wobbly: 80 Years of Rebel Art,” featuring original works by many IWW cartoonists. Carlos was probably the only IWW artist whose work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His art is exhibited throughout the United States, Europe and Mexico.

In the 1960s, Carlos married Marianna Drogitis, and in 1965 they moved to Chicago where he became involved with the local Mexican and Chicano mural movement. “I’ve always identified myself as a Mexican,” he says. “ I guess this was a result of my early years in grammar school. Even though I resembled my German mother more than my Mexican father, being the only Mexican in a school full of whites made me mighty soon realize who I was.

But it was my German mother who started my Mexican consciousness. She said, “Son, don’t let the children at school call you a foreigner. Through your father you are Indian, and that makes you more American than any of them.”

Inspired above all by the work of José Guadalupe Posada, printmaker of the

Mexican Revolution, and the German expressionist Käthe Kollwitz, Carlos blends the techniques and styles of the German expressionists with themes from the ancient Aztecs and modern Chicanos. He made countless images support striking workers, from miners in Bolivia to farm workers in California, though he is best known for large linocut poster-portraits of activists and labor organizers such as Joe Hill, Ricardo Flóres Magón, Lucy Parsons and Ben Fletcher.

“After some 40 years of construction labor, record salesman, bookseller, factory stiff and janitor, I no longer punch a clock for some employer and have entered the most productive phase of my life where I do what I want to do and not what some employer wants me to do for him…As I keep working out ideas, I keep getting more ideas. So I’m going to go out kicking and screaming.”

In 1998, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics honored Carlos Cortez with our “Art as a Hammer” Award for his inspired and inspiring use of art to create a more just world. He died in January 2005, in Chicago. He will be missed.

Carlos Cortez Presente!

Taken from politicalgraphics.org